DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 228 UD 021 219

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TITLE Classroom Interaction Patterns Among Black and White Boys and Girls (Summary).
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jul 80
GRANT NIE-G-78-0126
NOTE 8p.; For a related document see UD 021 218.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Desegregation; Elementary Education; Grade 6; *Group Dynamics; Interpersonal Relationship; Peer Acceptance; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Differences; Racial Relations; *Sex Differences; Sex Role; *Social Attitudes; Sociometric Techniques; *Student Attitudes; Student Behavior

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to observe the peer behavior of 92 black and white sixth graders in a large, urban middle school. A roster rated sociometric study was also conducted, in which the students rated the desirability of each of their classmates as both social and work partners. Both the behavioral and the sociometric study showed a sharp sex division among the students, along with a lesser but significant race division. The results of the study suggest that gender clustering reflects a genuine social barrier and is not merely an incidental product of divergent gender specific interests. The results of the study suggest that greater attention should be given to gender integration as an aspect of the larger goal of social integration. (Author/APM)

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ED198228

Classroom Interaction Patterns among Black and White Boys and Girls

(Summary)

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Final Project Report
Grant # NIE-G-78-0126

July, 1980

CG021219

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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The likely consequences of interracial schooling continue to be hotly debated a full quarter-century after Brown v. Board of Education. Research focusing on the outcomes of desegregated schooling has provided only limited knowledge of desegregation's impact on children, and has given us virtually no systematic information on the social processes which help shape these outcomes. Although recent ethnographic studies have added substantially to our understanding of peer behavior in desegregated schools, only a handful of studies have examined intergroup behavior in the schools using quantitative data-gathering strategies. Most of these have focused exclusively on the amount of such behavior, telling us nothing about its nature. Furthermore, these studies have rarely taken gender seriously as a second social barrier that may generate problems of its own and/or interact with those associated with race.

The research reported here was designed to fill some of these gaps in the literature by assessing peer behaviors and relationships among black and white boys and girls in the sixth grade of a large, urban middle school. About two-thirds of the school's approximately 1800 students were black. The white students tended to be middle-class whereas the majority of the black students came from lower- or working-class families. Black students as a group were noticeably behind their white classmates in academic performance. School authorities, however, took active measures to encourage positive race relations, and overtly racial conflict at the school was rare.

The present study has two complementary components. Our major effort was devoted to systematic observation of the peer behavior of 92 black and white girls and boys in several sixth-grade classrooms. Observed behaviors were coded for (1) the race and sex of the student observed (hereafter called the

subject), and of the child interacted with, (2) the immediate source of the coded behavior (subject, interactant, or both), (3) tone (positive, neutral, or negative), (4) form (physical vs. all others), and (5) task orientation (whether or not the behavior was related to an academic or teacher-sanctioned task). One black female, one white female, and one white male acted as observers.

The second component of the research was a roster-rating sociometric study in which sixth-graders in nine classes rated the desirability of each of their classmates as social partners during free time, and as work partners on a jointly rewarded mathemathical task involving either high or low intimacy of interaction. We were able to relate the findings of this sociometric study to those of the behavioral study, and to draw upon our earlier ethnographic work in the same school as a guide to interpretation.

The dominant impression conveyed by both the behavioral and the sociometric study was that of a sharp sex division among these sixth graders, along with a lesser but significant race division. About 88 percent of the sampled peer behaviors involved other children of the same sex; about 70 percent involved others of the same race. Boys interacted across racial lines somewhat more frequently than girls, and blacks interacted across gender lines proportionately more often than whites.

Black students were coded as the primary sources of 38 percent of the observed interracial interactions; the comparable figure for whites was 18 percent. (The remaining 44 percent were coded as mutual). This failure of white students fully to reciprocate black initiatives almost certainly reflects the black-white academic status inequality and the individualistic reward structures of the traditional classroom. The students had a realistic awareness of academic status; their ratings of their peers' math ability (made in

the context of the sociometric study), closely parallelled corresponding achievement test scores (r = .87). In the sociometric study, both black and white students tended to prefer high-achieving (hence white) partners for the rewarded academic task, whereas blacks and whites both showed a definite same-race perference for social partners. Behaviorally, our subjects' interactions with white peers were proportionately more likely to be task-related than were those with black peers.

Our analyses of the quality of interracial interaction are generally consistent with our earlier ethnographic data in suggesting minimal racially-motivated conflict at the school. Only about 7 percent of all recorded classroom peer interactions were coded as negative, despite our purposely broad and inclusive definition of negativity. Furthermore, interracial interactions differed in neither form nor tone from those occuring between students of the same race.

There were, however, suggestions of behavioral style differences between black and white students. The white students' peer behaviors were more often coded as positive in tone than were the black students' behaviors, which were more likely to be neutral in appearance. Physically aggressive behaviors or displays (i.e., those coded both physical in form and negative in tone), although infrequent, were more common among black than white subjects. (When we considered physical and non-physical behaviors together, however, the proportion of behaviors coded negative was at least as high for white subjects as for black). Even though we have no indication that black or white students modified their classroom behavior according to their interaction partners' race, the overall behavioral differences between the two groups mean that white students may tend to receive somewhat different behaviors from their black peers than from other whites, and vice versa. Under such circumstances,

interpersonal or intergroup misunderstanding is possible.

The likelihood of intergroup misunderstanding resulting from group differences is compounded where meaningful cross-racial contact is minimized. Unfortunately, the kind of prolonged and relatively intimate cross-racial cooperation which social psychological theory suggests enhances intergroup acceptance and understanding is not readily entered into by many students. In our sociometric study, race matching was a more important consideration in partner preference ratings for the high intimacy math task than for the corresponding low intimacy task, despite the attractiveness of the rewards offered for success.

However, the malleability of partner preference and interaction patterns is apparent both from the responsiveness of the children's partner choice preferences to the manipulation in the sociometric study and from comparison of our behavioral study with studies conducted in other settings or under other circumstances. Black students expressed much more willingness to interact with whites even in the high intimacy rewarded task than in the relatively unstructured free time or social period. The failure of the white students to reciprocate reflected to a marked extent the relevance of the academic reward structure to the perceived black-white achievement gap. In the regression analysis, perceived ability was an important predictor of partner preference ratings; race per se added little to the explained variance. Furthermore, other investigators have found that white boys, in particular, will readily choose black partners in play situations in which physical skills are valued.

The present study, then, illustrates the responsiveness of peer interaction and partner choice patterns to situational constraints and incentives. It further documents the need to alter the incentive structure of the traditional academic classroom, which given the frequently found correlation

between race and academic performance currently provides a mostly unilateral incentive for blacks to interact with whites, thereby setting the stage for rejection and a heightened sense of status inequality. Known methods for structuring increased equal-status interaction are discussed briefly in the accompanying report.

We have noted that gender clustering was even more pronounced than racial clustering among those sixth-grade students, a pattern found by several other investigators. Gender clustering at this age is both widely recognized and generally taken for granted as a harmless reflection of divergent boy/girl interests, which will eventually be overcome by advancing years and heightened romantic interest. The present investigators, however, believe there is cause for concern if developing romantic relationships are not built upon prior experience with positive cross-sex peer relationships.

Our study was not designed to explore the causes or the ultimate effects of sexual clustering among preadolescents. It does suggest, however, that the clustering reflects a genuine social barrier and is not merely an incidental product of divergent gender-specific interests. Sex matching was an important determinant of partner preference ratings in all conditions of the sociometric study--including the low intimacy rewarded task, to which gender matching would seem to have had little practical relevance. In the high intimacy academic task, sex matching appeared to be the primary determinant of partner preference ratings, despite the experimenter's emphasis on the relevance of ability to success on the task. Boys and girls apparently find it difficult to work together even when to do so would be in their own best interest.

The analysis of interaction tone provided further evidence that gender can be a barrier to relaxed interaction. Cross-sex interactions, though relatively few, were more likely than within-sex interactions to be negative, even though both black and white boys generally conformed to the cultural taboo

against directing physically aggressive behavior against girls, at least in the academic classroom. Interestingly, the female subject, male interactant combination yielded the highest proportion of negative and positive peer behaviors, with neutral or matter-of-fact behaviors being particularly rare. In light of our earlier observational research, we interpreted this apparently ambivalent pattern as reflecting both the beginning of romantic interest and an incapacity for relaxed or sustained cross-sex interaction.

These indications of the pervasiveness of the gender barrier in peer relationships are consistent with our previously collected observational data on the strength of peer-enforced norms against many forms of cross-sex interaction. Our concern about the possible consequences of these preadolescent norms for emerging adult relationships leads us to recommend greater attention to gender integration as an aspect of the larger goal of social integration in our schools. In the case of sex as well as of race, the acacemic classroom seems an ideal setting in which to implement new incentive structures, designed to encourage intergroup cooperation and to modify interaction norms.